



# A Strange Night in a Strange House: The Country House as Queer Space in Interwar Mystery Fiction

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**Abstract.** Drawing on Barry McCrea’s work on Arthur Conan Doyle, this article challenges claims that the interwar country-house mystery arose from reactionary nostalgia for a “dead” institution. Responding not to a sudden death but to a slow decline, the form in fact facilitated the country house’s reconfiguration as a biologically sterile but narratively generative queer space.

This war has filled England with strangers, with men and women from far away, who may not for years have seen the faces they love. . . . We, whose English homes mean so much to us—let us make it the rule that . . . there shall be no strangers. . . . What *is* home? Must it be a narrow place, from which the family bars out the world’s troubles, ignoring these in a happiness all its own? Surely not. . . . It is true that we turn to home for its quiet, its privacy, its uniqueness. All the same, we go wrong if we do not realise that home—each home—is a living, organic part of the world. (Bowen 21; emphasis in original)

Writing in 1942, at the height of war on the homefront, Elizabeth Bowen was peculiarly well placed to voice this plea for openness: an Anglo-Irish “stranger” in England, and a prolific essayist and social commentator, she was also a proponent of the “middlebrow” novel for whom houses were always particularly “ambivalent spaces” (Humble 63). The mid-century middlebrow novel was a form marked by “its overriding concern with the home” (Humble 5), and although it may have taken a second war to prompt so explicit a reimagining of domestic space in the popular press, the implications of this reimagining had been playing out in Bowen’s fictional houses and those of her contemporaries since World

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War I. Nowhere was this more prominent than in the ubiquitous country houses of interwar mystery fiction—as exemplified by, although by no means limited to, Agatha Christie—which exposed the narrative possibilities of a queer new spatial order.

## I

Identifying in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes canon a proto-modernist attempt to break from the conventions of the Victorian marriage plot, Barry McCrea argues that the “fundamental binary of these stories—the opposition of London and the countryside—is a symbolic expression of the competition between the family and alternative networks” (69). For McCrea, the countryside is characterized by foreknowledge and familiarity, its social interactions dependent upon heredity, and its dominant narrative mode the traditional genealogical plot. The city is a more volatile environment, characterized by anonymity and strangeness, its social interactions dependent upon adjacency, and its dominant narrative mode the emergent queer plot (McCrea 69). This binary is manifest in the physical spaces occupied, on the one hand, by the detective and his assistant and, on the other, by the country families they help, “the two symbolic homes that pull the stories in opposing directions: the hereditary rural property inhabited by an ancient line and the bachelor rooms of 221B Baker Street, a household unconnected to family systems of marriage and reproduction, but . . . a center . . . from which narratives are produced and arranged” (McCrea 69).

This generative process is underpinned by the peculiarities of bachelorhood, Holmes and Watson having been drawn together precisely because they are bachelors—single men of a similar class, each possessed of an income insufficient to secure respectable rooms alone. As Watson himself confides: “I had neither kith nor kin in England, and was therefore as free as air—or as free as an income of eleven shillings and sixpence a day will permit a man to be” (Conan Doyle, *Scarlet* 15). Invalided “home” from Afghanistan, Watson finds himself an unknown quantity amid the anonymity, chaos, and contingency of London, where he must accept the kindness of strangers, forging connections with whomsoever “is immediately *adjacent*” (McCrea 83; emphasis in original). In the wholly *unfamiliar* Holmes he encounters “a stranger who is not a transitional figure who interrupts and then becomes family,” as in the conventional marriage plot, “but one who is instead a rival to it, who offers a distinct, different kind of bond . . . that cannot be subsumed into genealogy but might nonetheless offer a basis for a sense of time, change and continuity” (McCrea 14–15). A basis, that is, for an alternative model of narrative trajectory, a “queer plot” (McCrea 3) as generative as its genealogical antecedent.

In functioning as the site of this productive process, as the marital home functions as the site of biological reproduction, the rooms at 221B might thus be termed a “queer space” (Désert 17). Although the phrase itself is markedly absent from McCrea's study, his analysis would appear, nonetheless, to be predicated upon the principles outlined by Jean-Ulrick Désert and since developed by more prominent queer theorists such as Judith Halberstam. For McCrea, irrespective of Holmes's sexuality, his “living arrangements” constitute an “alternative family” at odds with the genealogical families of those he assists: this queer household, “the fruit of a random encounter in the city, is the structuring center of the stories, biologically sterile but narratively productive” (20). Reflecting a continued critical impulse to “detach queerness from sexual identity” (Halberstam 1) and think of it instead as an outcome of lifestyle—of spatial and temporal practices that disrupt the

conventional cycle of birth, maturation, marriage, reproduction, and death that Halberstam terms “the schedule of normativity” (7)—McCrea’s reading of 221B closely accords with Désert’s definition of queer space.

For Désert, “the act of sex . . . need not be what defines queer space. The definition of queer space by erotic program would be as limiting as the word *homosexual*” (20; emphasis in original). Rather:

A queer space is an activated zone made proprietary by the occupant or . . . wanderer. It is at once private and public. Our cities, our neighborhoods our homes are loosely defined territories inscribed not merely by the laws of proprietary ownership but by implicit and shifting influences of presence, conspicuous or otherwise. Queer presences lend an inflected turn of meaning to such places. (21)

A home established by two perfect strangers, 221B is also—in part because of the bachelor status of its occupants—a space peculiarly receptive to the wanderer. At once private residence and public business premises, it is “a house where unknown visitors of any class, nationality or age might arrive at any time with any kind of tale to tell, a house whose door . . . fails to seal off the domestic realm from the world of strangers outside” (McCrea 88). By contrast, the country estates inhabited by the majority of Holmes’s clients center around houses normally frequented only at appointed times, and only by family members and intimates of equal status. Even the domestic staffs of these houses, who maintain such routines, while clearly of an inferior social class to their employers, are drawn nonetheless from local stock, according to ties established over several generations. Thus regulated, the properties of Holmes’s clients are socially resistant both to the stranger and to the inflected turn of meaning leant by strange presences, and this resistance is arguably underpinned by their physical impenetrability.

The correlation was drawn from life, Conan Doyle’s tales representing the culmination of a historical process that, by the mid-nineteenth century, found the country house increasingly “closed and impermeable” to outside influences, its transformation from a public and political space to a private and domestic one accompanied by an increasing spatial complexity (Hanson 155–56). To take the most famous of Conan Doyle’s fictional country houses, Baskerville Hall is protected to the rear by “two lines of old yew hedge, twelve feet high and impenetrable” (*Hound* 680). At the front, Watson notes, “the lodge-gates, a maze of fantastic tracery in wrought iron, with weather-bitten pillars on either side” (701), bar the estate entrance. It is a formidable example of the Victorian stronghold with which, as Bowen would complain forty years later, “the family bars out the world’s troubles” (21), concerned only with its own. The symbolic burden of Baskerville Hall itself—reverenced by its incumbent as the “old family home . . . in which for five hundred years [the Baskerville] people have lived” (702)—is never in doubt, and it is one shared by most of Conan Doyle’s rural seats: “the crimes that Holmes is called in to investigate in these family manses are inevitably based around a threat . . . to the continuity or purity of the family line. Tangled, murky London is the symbolic counterpart to this genealogical countryside, and . . . the contrast . . . is a fundamental binary in the Holmes stories” (McCrea 69–70).

Conan Doyle produced these narratives over a period of four decades, the last volume appearing in 1927, and McCrea’s binary, as manifested in the spatial opposition of queer city apartment and genealogical country house, appears to hold throughout the canon. This coherence is, however, only achieved through temporal sleight-of-hand: every Holmes story—excepting “His Last Bow” (1917)—is set before 1914. For McCrea’s binary is irrevocably collapsed by the circumstances of World War I, a war that anticipated Bowen’s

experiences of its sequel in being, as Wesley Kort puts it, both “dislocating and disorienting” (4). This is not to disavow the queerness of the interwar city: the domestic arrangements of Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot and Captain Arthur Hastings for a time reprise the Holmesian model, the pair sharing rooms in London, and the “queer” (67) events of “The Adventure of the Cheap Flat” are only explicable within the context of a transient and anonymous population such as that of the city tenement. It is, rather, to suggest that, in interwar mystery fiction, the queer possibilities of the country house are drawn out, reconfiguring it as a “space where queerness . . . dominates the (heterocentric) norm, the dominant social narrative of the landscape” (Désert 21).

The upheavals of World War I were just that: sudden, violent disturbances characterized most immediately by spatial phenomena. In England, as across Europe, “displacement was a universal experience of the war” (Barkhof and Smith 3). The German invasion of Belgium in 1914 resulted in the first of many waves of refugees, numbers of which sought safety in England, while mobilization saw millions of men “forced away from their homes to embark on a new lifestyle of violence and hostility” (Barkhof and Smith 3), in a foretaste of the mass dislocation identified by Bowen in 1942. Those who survived returned, perhaps inevitably, to an altered landscape, a strange new spatial order. That a new generation of mystery writers were alert to the implications of such displacements for the erstwhile genealogical country house is signaled by what might be termed “the creation myth” of Christie’s Poirot and Hastings.

## II

Set against the backdrop of war in Europe, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920)—Christie’s debut novel and a landmark of what would become known as Golden Age detective fiction—seems at first to follow Conan Doyle’s model. A wounded officer “invalided home from the Front” in 1916, Hastings explains, in terms redolent of Watson’s, that “[h]aving no near relations or friends, I was trying to make up my mind what to do, when I ran across John Cavendish. I had seen very little of him for some years. Indeed, I had never known him particularly well” (*Mysterious* 9). Yet it is not in the city, but at Styles Court—the “country-place” of this near-stranger and one that prides itself on being “quite a war household” (*Mysterious* 10, 21)—that Hastings forges an intimate relationship with the Belgian refugee Poirot, the “quaint dandyfied little man” (*Mysterious* 35) who will come to “shape and mould” his future (*Curtain* 5–6), marking the genesis of his own queer plot. The physical displacements of World War I ultimately facilitate this queer union, but the genealogical symbolism of Styles itself is always in doubt, Cavendish’s father having “purchased” (*Mysterious* 10) rather than inherited the estate on marrying John’s stepmother, before bequeathing it to her: “He had been completely under his wife’s ascendancy, so much so that, on dying, he left the place to her for her lifetime, as well as the larger part of his income; an arrangement that was distinctly unfair to his two sons” (*Mysterious* 10–11).

It is made clear that both transactions occurred several years before the war, but the sale and subsequent decline of Styles—Poirot remarks that “one may live in a big house and yet have no comfort” (63)—do nonetheless form part of a pattern exacerbated by it. For those who have attributed the rise of the country-house mystery to reactionary nostalgia and middlebrow sentimentality (Watson 171; Williams 249–50; Symons 12–13), the inherited social narrative of a doomed elite has—despite its own roots in such sentimentality—

proved convenient: lamenting “how much the quality and vitality of landed society in the post-war years suffered from the absence of the sons killed in France,” mid-century commentators commonly held these “grievous sacrifices” directly responsible for the “dissolution of . . . the great estate system” and the death of the country house (Thompson 327, 333). The more complex reality, however, was not a sudden death but a slow decline. Few country estates were, as this narrative would suggest, threatened as a direct result of a family line being entirely extinguished during the war—in cases in which an immediate heir was lost, there was usually a younger son or other male relative to inherit both land and title (Horn 9).

It was, rather, the insidious economic burden that this inheritance itself entailed which precipitated a gradual decline, rendering the physical and social boundaries of the country house altogether more permeable in the years that followed. Wartime legislation had reduced death duties imposed on landed estates in respect of deaths occurring as a result of the war (Horn 30), but these again rose after the armistice. As Pamela Horn documents, in households recovering from “the death or serious injury of a father or husband, incomes were much reduced” (56), and this, combined with the continued rise in income tax and super-taxes levied on land, forced many “to reduce their obligations by selling land, selling or letting country houses, and disposing of other valuable assets” (Horn 70). Others attempted to increase revenue by formally opening their estates to the paying public, although insufficient funds for maintenance and the shortage of reliable staff—a persistent problem since the height of the war—meant that even these properties “were often neglected and uninhabited” (Horn 86).

The mystery fiction of the period not only “recognises the impact of the war” (Knight 89) but also *responds* to it, engaging overtly with the repercussions of wartime restrictions and postwar financial crisis for the country house. At Styles, a housemaid recalls the estate’s order “‘before the war, when it was kept as a gentleman’s place should be.’” She tells Poirot: “I wish you could have seen it then, sir. A fair sight it was” (*Mysterious* 77). Whether Cavendish, on inheriting it, will be able to “keep up the place” (177) even to this diminished wartime standard, remains uncertain: “‘There are the death duties, of course, but half my father’s money goes with the place, and Lawrence will stay with us for the present, so there is his share as well. We shall be pinched at first, of course, because . . . I am in a bit of a hole financially myself’” (177). Such uncertainty proves a common thread, Christie centering the later Poirot novel *Peril at End House* (1932) on “a tumble-down old place” left to go “to rack and ruin” (18) as a result of postwar economic pressures. Its only resident, the spirited but penniless Magdala “Nick” Buckley, finds herself “the last of an old family” (18) at just 19, as she has lost both her grandfather and her brother—and with them, “two lots of death duties” (46)—in the wake of her father’s premature death. He, Nick informs Poirot with disturbing irreverence, “was invalided home from the War, then got pneumonia and died in 1919” (46).

Critics have come, particularly within the context of the country house setting—and for many it is no more than a “setting” (Knight 86), a convenient “shell” (Williams 249)—to associate Christie, in particular, almost exclusively with the “closed” and “closely related society” proscribed by W. H. Auden’s notes on detective fiction (407). In doing so, many have failed to register the ways in which her decaying country houses illustrate what Alison Light terms “the increasing openness of middle-class life, as it moved away from a fixed notion of social respectability based purely upon kinship and connection” (86) amid the flux wrought by war. As Peter Mandler notes, for the increasing numbers of people “fanning out into open country, . . . the country did in fact seem to be ‘open.’ The breakup of the



great estates and the decay of estate maintenance meant that fewer obstacles were being offered" (232). The effect, on a rural population no longer able to maintain its material boundaries, was the translation of a growing sense that outsiders were "taking an almost physical possession of the countryside" (Mandler 234) into "a recognition that the social world itself had changed, and was much more fluid than before 1914" (Horn 47). This recognition is reflected in interwar mystery fiction that, far from asserting "the static nature of society," as Julian Symons (12) suggests, actually highlights its mutability, enacting the transformation of what Susan Rowland designates "that emblem of social stability, the country house" (43), into "an emblem of difficult and disturbing change" (Humble 111).

For Light, Christie—and it is possible to extend this remark to her contemporaries—in offering "a modern sense of the unstable limits of respectability . . . portrays a society of strangers whose social exchanges have become theatrical and dis severed from a sense of place" (61–62). Following Light, the motif of "transgression" (61)—of metaphorical limits destabilised or violated—has dominated scholarship on interwar mystery writing. Critics have tended, however, to privilege the body—living or dead—as the site of transgression, drawing on theories of gender and performativity to interrogate the theatricality diagnosed by Light (Plain 1–18, 29–55; Peach 10, 25–55; English 144–68; Hoffman 1–14, 157–90). Few—with the possible exception of Brittain Bright and Rebecca Mills (32–38)—have registered the spatial implications of the term itself for a milieu "dis severed from a sense of place." Deriving from the Latin verb *transgredi* or "to step across" a boundary or threshold, the word *transgress* implies physical movement from one designated space to another. To transgress is, at the most basic level, to commit a *spatial* infraction—to trespass with or without consent—and it is precisely this mode of transgression that underpins the interwar country-house mystery, an increasing social mobility manifesting itself in the failure of the built environment to keep strangers out.

The "unstable limits" of Light's analysis take on concrete form as the walls and doors of so many ailing country houses, seemingly as unable as the lodgings at 221B Baker Street, "to seal off the domestic realm from the world of strangers outside" (McCrea 88). In some cases strangers are invited in. Christie's *Styles* is a working example of the wartime dictum that Bowen sought to promote, making "it the rule that . . . there shall be no strangers" (21). It is a point of convergence for the displaced, among them the recovering serviceman and the Belgian refugee but also the openly sought female companion; the orphaned Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse; and the unaccredited secretary-cum-husband who, having "turned up from nowhere," proves himself "an absolute outsider" (*Mysterious* 12). This alternative family is starkly at odds both with the genealogical families of the prewar country house and with the schedule of normativity it fostered, but it is no less narratively productive, its interactions facilitating a newly evolving queer plot dependent not on heredity but adjacency.

Elsewhere, strangers to this former hereditary stronghold penetrate its neglected boundaries unannounced and uninvited. Christie's *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925) finds its eponym a point of convergence for outsiders of a different kind, as a delicate political matter sees it commandeered by a disparate party of European politicians, Foreign Office employees, and city socialites, leaving its bewildered owner to bemoan "the assumption that Chimneys was a national possession rather than a private country house" (*Secret* 34). A former Castle's Select Tour agent and inveterate drifter, the novel's protagonist, Anthony Cade, takes this assumption to its extreme, gaining access to the estate by altogether unconventional, not to say illegal, means. Not only does he "scale the wall late at night, tramp across the park, and try the downstairs windows" (157) of the mansion on the evening of the murder, he is audacious enough to return the following day, this time by the front door,

openly casting himself—in what will become a familiar refrain—as the “suspicious stranger from [the] village inn” (151). He freely admits to “trespassing upon Lord Caterham’s property” (152) but is nonetheless absorbed into the chaotic household: “Anthony realised the altered tone of his surroundings.... He was no longer an ambiguous stranger” (172–73).

Chimneys is, to recall Désert’s definition of queer space, almost immediately “made proprietary” by this professional “wanderer” who, assured of his altered status, takes it upon himself to patrol the boundaries he has so lately transgressed. Catching a “second suspicious stranger” (200) prowling the grounds, he shows no hesitation in pointing out, with self-conscious irony: “There’s a right of way across the park—some distance away, but all this is the private part. You’re trespassing” (198). When the intruder returns by night—this time gaining entry to the house itself through a ground-floor window—Anthony’s self-assurance turns to complacency as, accepting the stranger’s claim that he is investigating legitimately (if unconventionally) as an officer of the Sûreté in Paris, he takes ownership of both space and situation, framing himself as an established representative of the household with an extraordinary show of hospitality by no means his to proffer: “What about refreshments?” (253). Such episodes render the subsequent suggestion that the figure behind the crimes at Chimneys “is actually among the household” (265) virtually meaningless, illustrating only that, where the interwar country house is concerned, as one of the period’s shrewder policemen wryly declares elsewhere: “Household’s rather an elastic term” (Christie, *Ackroyd* 87).

The ease with which outsiders penetrate both Styles and Chimneys is later replicated in *Peril at End House* as Poirot and Hastings “experiment” (72)—unsolicited and unannounced—with the boundaries of the novel’s eponymous estate. Their unimpeded progress, “through a gap in the hedge” (52), across the “private” (72) park, and into the house by an open window, not only demonstrates “how easy” (72) it might be for a stranger to violate the property’s spatial limits, it also serves—despite Poirot’s self-indulgent and somewhat proprietary assertion that they are “known as friends of the house” (73)—to heighten one’s sense of their own strangeness as trespassers on only their second visit to the property. Poirot, in particular, while vouchsafed a nominative subtlety denied coteremporary fictional detectives such as Gladys Mitchell’s Mrs. Lestrangle Bradley and Nicholas Blake’s Nigel Strangeways, is nonetheless strange, a “queer little foreigner” (*Peril* 27) out of place and out of sync with the traditional rhythms of the English country house. Indeed, Poirot’s own insistence on local foreknowledge as a defense against outsiders fails to account for the apparent freedom of movement enjoyed by several other strangers, to whom the material instabilities of postwar life have rendered the estate peculiarly vulnerable. The sole occupant of End House itself, owner Nick Buckley has been forced to “let the lodge” (*Peril* 47) to a mysterious and intrusive foreign couple, “unknown Australians” (65) whose brief entry in Poirot’s case-notes concludes: “Nothing known of antecedents” (126). Equally without provenance and as undeterred by physical boundaries is the shadowy figure referred to simply as “J.” (113). Identified only latterly as the estranged husband of Nick’s best friend, this “queer” and “problematical outsider” haunts the estate as “a person unknown” (48, 165, 270).

### III

The encroachment of strangeness into the formerly closed, domestic space of the country house radically reconfigures it as a queer space in narrative terms. In acknowledging its increased vulnerability to strange presences, the interwar mystery exposes—arguably

for the first time in mainstream fiction—the potential of what John Scott and Russell Hogg term “strange and stranger ruralities” (171) for an alternative narrative mode, concerned not—as has previously been suggested—with “the bucolic dream of England” (Grossvogel 43) but with the altogether queerer reality: “with *other* rurals, with unruly spaces, environments and ways of life” (Scott and Hogg 172; emphasis in original). The dominant social narrative of the country house, for so long dictated by genealogy and played out in the heterocentric norms of the marriage plot, is queered by the “unruly” spatial and temporal practices of its interwar occupants and visitors, its impetus no longer dominated by the demands of hereditary continuity but, like the narrative mode facilitated by the rooms at 221B Baker Street, “centered on interruptions and on the breaking of expected routine” (McCrea 88).

In an environment traditionally governed by Halberstam’s schedule of normativity, the breaking of expected routine—however minor the apparent interruption—ultimately represents a challenge not only to “domestic heteronormativity” (Hoffman 166) but to domestic space itself. This is illustrated in strikingly different ways by *Chimneys* and *End House*. Unlike *Styles*, these properties are the ancestral seats of their principal occupants, a fact that throws the postwar relegation of hereditary continuity as a narrative imperative into sharp relief. *Chimneys*, which features in *The Secret of Chimneys* and *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929), is home to Lord Caterham and his unmarried daughter, Lady Eileen “Bundle” Brent, who is the eldest of three girls produced—symbolically—by a mother who, Bundle reports, “got tired of having nothing but girls and died. Thought someone else could take on the job of providing an heir” (*Secret* 196). Nobody has, and yet—as Bundle’s cheerful irreverence attests—Christie captures *Chimneys* not in the grip of a domestic, but of a political, succession crisis. This is a home concerned with—indeed, unable to shut out—the “world’s troubles” (Bowen 21), the clash of prewar with postwar spatiality manifesting itself in the opposing attitudes of father and daughter to the “queer things” (*Secret* 225) that go on in the house as a direct result of “the heterogeneous assembly” (207) of strangers attracted by the crisis.

Bundle is thrilled by the “interruptions” contingent upon the reconfiguration of *Chimneys* as a space at once private and public, chief among them being the advent of murder, which elicits from her the telling observation: “We’ve never had a murder in the house before. Exciting, isn’t it?” (196). It is excitement—and not the scheduled life beside “a suitable husband” (*Seven* 144)—that Bundle desires. Her father, by contrast—who values his home “for its quiet, its privacy, its uniqueness” (Bowen 21)—desires only peace, showing as little interest in the survival of the foreign dynasty by whom his house has been requisitioned as in the continuance of his own line. He despairs of the tendency of unfamiliar guests “to pop in and out” (*Secret* 338) unannounced and of the trouble that invariably ensues: “Naturally I expect Brents to die here—they don’t count. But I do object to strangers” (*Seven* 54). Yet, for all his pretensions to an “old-fashioned and unreasonable” (*Secret* 338) sensibility, he is shrewd enough to understand that social life—in all its aspects—is, as Edward Soja argues, “both space-forming and space contingent, a producer and a product of spatiality” (129). The changing habits of the rural estate, queered by the anonymous and transient presences it houses, have the capacity to *re-form* the space itself, and Lord Caterham is clearly cognizant of this, announcing: “On the whole, . . . keeping an hotel has some advantages over keeping a country house. . . . That little notice they hang up in your room. Visitors intending departure must give notice before twelve o’clock” (*Secret* 337–38). He vows: “If *Chimneys* is so valuable to the nation, let the nation buy it. Otherwise I shall sell it to a syndicate and they can turn it into an hotel” (399).



He never does, opting instead to let the property as a whole, a move that—in laying Chimneys open to unsupervised strangers—facilitates yet another murder, much to his chagrin: “The thing will become a habit soon. This is the second” (*Seven* 54). Yet the reconfiguration of the country house as a biologically sterile but, as this repetition confirms, narratively productive queer space—a “living, organic part of the world” (Bowen 21) subject to “shifting influences of presence” (Désert 21)—continues to inform the country-house mystery, the symbiotic connection between space and social life underpinning the genre. In a queer plot that illustrates with disturbing poignancy Nicola Humble’s sense that much middlebrow fiction of this period suggests “the desire of women to gain an identity from their homes is pitiful and retrogressive” (112), *Peril at End House* sees a house so closely identified with its occupant as to bring into question her agency itself. A mystery set in motion by a succession of violent interruptions, “queer accidents” (*Peril* 265) that threaten the life of strangely childlike heroine Nick, and sustained by the murder of her cousin in what appears to be a case of mistaken identity, the narrative unfolds amid repeated claims as to the malignancy of End House itself, a property personified as a “strange” and even “evil house” (204, 276). To what extent the “queer feeling” (178) that pervades the house is a product of its occupant’s queerness, however, and how far its producer, is uncertain.

There is no doubt that Nick *is* queer, her character no less than her features “childishly twisted awry” (*Peril* 83) in a peculiarly androgynous—and even faery—state of arrested development: “There was something elfin about her altogether” (20). Registered in the discrepancies in both age and gender inherent in the pet-name—Young Nick—she has retained into her twenties, it is this ambiguous state that prompts her in adulthood to enact “a queer wish” (85) born of the child’s imagination: “I love End House. I’ve always wanted to produce a play there. It’s got an—an atmosphere of drama about it. I’ve seen all sorts of plays staged there in my mind. And now it’s as though a drama were being acted there. Only I’m not producing it . . . I’m in it!” (85–86). This disingenuousness is misleading: the reader later learns that her childlike pleasure in acting, coupled with “a fanatical devotion to the home of her ancestors” (90), has seen the fulfillment of her queer wish, the house serving as a stage upon which she might perform, incorporating as bit-players the strangers who transgress its untended limits. Casting herself as both producer—the engineer of the “peculiar accidents” (107) that culminate in murder—and lead, in the role of their intended target, she has attempted to save the dilapidated and heavily mortgaged property not through the processes of maturation, marriage, and reproduction but by “playing” (260) the grieving fiancée—and principal beneficiary—of a dead stranger. Yet the degree to which Nick’s responsibility might be diminished by the psychological hold that End House has over her remains a point of contention.

Although Poirot admits that it “was from the house that Mademoiselle Nick took her inspiration” (*Peril* 276), his use of both possessive case and active verb emphasize her agency. Her friends are more ambivalent, recalling what they know of her past in an effort to explain her actions. A neglected childhood spent roaming the equally neglected house and grounds, Nick’s formative years have provided “no upbringing of any kind” (204), her apparent lack of finesse even prompting Poirot to remark: “The young girls—they are not properly trained nowadays. The order, the method, it is left out of their bringing up” (168). The strange influence of the house—in lieu of parental direction—has rendered Nick “a queer little girl” (284) whose lapses in behavior are still deemed “hardly her fault” (204). Her friends are thus inclined to believe her a personality warped and stunted by an unruly environment: “Yes, let us think of her like that. A queer little girl. A queer little girl who couldn’t help herself” (284). Failing—as Christie’s vocabulary underscores—to grow “up,”

she has, like Kathryn Bond Stockton's queer child, grown "sideways" (1), forging a symbiotic connection with what is immediately adjacent, a queer—and queerly productive—union with End House itself. "We have spent a strange night in this strange house," Poirot concedes in the aftermath of a dramatic dénouement, but there the subject rests (286).

The fates of End House and Chimneys remain a mystery, and yet Lord Caterham is, in a sense, granted the last word: Christie's *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* (1975) finds Poirot and Hastings reunited *en famille* (8) at a postwar Styles, now transformed into "the permeable space that is the hotel" (Levander and Guterl 26). The queering of the country house is taken to its logical conclusion here, the hotel representing the queerest of spaces in Désert's terms, its unique permeability matched by "the fluidity and interplay of public and private worlds ongoing within its walls" (Levander and Guterl 26). It is a queer space but also, as Caroline Levander and Matthew Guterl argue, a "deeply generative" one, since it represents "a flexible, shifting site of narrative making" (1, 111). More than this, since the anonymity and impersonality of the hotel render it—as sociologist Norman Hayner observed as early as the interwar period itself—a "free" zone (790) where the individual, "released from restraint," might indulge the "free play of impulses" upon which crime is itself contingent (795), the queering of the country house—from domestic to hotel space—allows the country-house mystery room to evolve into a modern genre without recourse to nostalgia or anachronism.

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